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## Review of *Artistry in Native American Myths*, by Karl Kroeber.

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*Artistry in Native American Myths.* By Karl Kroeber. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. Index. xi + 292 pp. \$70.00 cloth, \$27.50 paper.

In this volume, Karl Kroeber, Mellon Professor of Humanities at Columbia University, makes an important contribution to the understanding of the oral mythology of Native North America by using thirty-six stories to illustrate and explore the form, function, and artistic achievement of such narratives. Each chapter begins with from one to twenty brief

stories, first published in collections between the 1890s and the 1990s, that range from star legends and bear stories to Trickster tales and other narratives, representing considerable variety of tribal origin and translation style and including multiple versions of similar tales. The commentary that follows them does not so much analyze the individual stories in depth as use them as examples of a type of highly-skilled artistic and cultural expression that has as often been obscured as elucidated by Euro-American scholarship. The notes following each chapter's commentary provide cultural and historical background on the tribes represented, along with information on critical sources, helpful to specialists and non-specialists alike. These notes, like the stories and commentary, are referenced in the volume's index.

In an attempt to help readers move beyond the biases of our print-oriented society, Kroeber draws on a wide range of ideas and sources to argue that imposing structuralist or deconstructionist frameworks on oral stories usually hinders our understanding of them, while employing the insights of thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Ong, Gerald Vizenor, and Pierre Bourdieu can increase it. Many scholars may not agree with Kroeber's assertion that it is inherently misleading to think of myths as oral literature, but he does make a strong case that the usual techniques of literary criticism prove inadequate to explicate types of creative imaginings that are oral and aural rather than written and visual; that exist in constantly changing versions rather than in final forms; that focus on repetition of actions and events rather than on description, character motivation, figures of speech, or prosody; that are modular in form and may be told separately or combined into longer units; and that are enactments embedded in the daily life of tribal cultures, functioning to renew these societies and promote their ongoing vitality.

It is unfortunate, if understandable in a work of this scope and variety, that Kroeber does not present more analysis of the wording of

the tales in their original language; yet the discussion he provides of them in English translation is both stimulating and informative.

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